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MEDIA AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Introduction

When approaching issues in international political and foreign policy, actors need to attain the right balance and equilibrium in their approach with regards to competing priorities, opposing ideologies and differing approaches aimed at leveraging power (McClory, 2016: 12). Values and interests are important factors in shaping and determining the perception of policy makers and directions in foreign policy and practice; however, this is only part of the equation. Those opposing values and interests of other foreign policy actors are critical in shaping responses and reactions, such as has been witnessed in Ukraine during and after Euromaidan (Tsygankov, 2015). When taken at a more practical level, “the policies and practices of public diplomacy reflect the ‘contextual intelligence’ of the state” (Hayden, 2012: 277).

Public diplomacy (PD) is intended to engage in public debates, influence public opinion and shape relationship dynamics (Sevin, 2015). It does this in order to help realise a state’s efforts in foreign policy goals and objectives. This is achieved through a government communicating interactively with an international audience (‘Government to People’ or G2P). This chapter seeks to trace the use of media-based communication (including social media and Internet-based) within its PD, which is linked to foreign policy aims and objectives as outlined in the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy conceptual document. This document has been subsequently updated in 2016. It is an intention of this chapter to analyse and examine the conceptual/theoretical means, the operational mechanism and the desired/intended foreign policy outcomes.

Unlike many authors within the current period of confrontation between Russia and the West, it is not the intention of the author to assign any ethical or moral value in support of or against what is happening. Rather it is the intention to account for what transpires and why it does so. The current state-state level of political conflict and diplomatic impasse that exists between Russia and the West means that other means and channels of communication and audience are needed and sought. Mass media, and especially Internet-based and social media, offer an opportunity for interactive G2P forms of communication. This communication is dialogic, rather than monologic, in nature, which enables a more effective means of influence and persuasion (Simons, 2015b). The question to be investigated is how are foreign policy, communication means and event/issue opportunities coinciding in global events? It is not the intent of the author to engage in content analysis of media-based communications, but rather the results that are transpiring from the information and communication strategies used.

Before addressing this question, the chapter will begin with a brief overview of the current state of research on Russian public diplomacy and soft power. There is a significant split in opinion and characterisation of Russian efforts, which is indicated by the words and terms that are used to describe Russia's efforts in this field. This is followed by an overview of how Russian PD has evolved over time in the post-Cold War world. Not only do means and approach differ, but so do the objectives, goals and foreign policy framework. The next section deals with an attempt by Russia to break the global US hegemony and bring back 'multi-polarity' within the international political system. The strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities are explored in turn. Possible future trends and prospects of Russian foreign policy in the PD can develop and evolve.

Current state of art in research

The current state of political and diplomatic relations between the West and Russia is depicted as being located somewhere between competition and conflict between the blocks within a geopolitical context. Tsygankov (2016) notes that throughout history, Russia has either tried to imitate or compete with the West; it has never ignored events and processes that have taken place in that space. Tsygankov (2015: 19) states that "the values/interests nexus is helpful in understanding the foreign policy of great powers such as Russia. In addition, one must consider interaction with other large states that compete with Russia for influence in Europe and Eurasia". There are those that depict the current situation as being a New Cold War (Lucas, 2014; Osipova, 2015; Legvold, 2016). A New Cold War narrative is not realistic at this stage, but it does serve a purpose. It attempts to recreate a familiar narrative, together with the associated struggle, values, villains and heroes. The current conflict/competition is much more pragmatically based (on geopolitical influence) than ideological in nature. In addition, a great asymmetry exists in terms of tangible military power (such as size of armed forces and defence budgets) of the West and Russia.

This increasing competition has been seen for some time already in events and processes occurring in post-Soviet space, such as the increasing tensions that led to an armed conflict in Georgia in 2008 that was based within competing and interacting frames and perceptions of power and security between Georgia and Russia (Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009). This current state of being in the 21st century has been explained in geopolitical terms by some:

The United States is struggling to hold on to the position of sole superpower, and is hesitant to accept rapidly rising multipolar world order. Russia, on the other hand, is still reeling from the abrupt demise of the Soviet Union, seeking restoration of its regional power and demanding recognition as an actor of global significance with legitimate interests that others should respect. While there are concrete economic and security interests at stake, perceptions play an equally important part in shaping the distrust and tensions plaguing the relationship between the two former superpowers.

(Osipova, 2015: 41–42)

The above description of the current problems in the relations between the United States and Russia is also valid and applicable to the wider global diplomatic and political trends and events. One of the intellectual problems in the current study of public diplomacy within foreign policy is the deliberate and inaccurate assigning of labels to an opponent's/competitor's international communication attempts. This issue is related to the rhetorical attempts to shape perception and public

opinion through contests and competitions concerning messenger credibility. Within the current geopolitical conflict, it is very evident in how Russian communications are worded. There is in some cases, more talk about “weaponised information” and “propaganda” (Lucas and Nimmo, 2015) or a “firehose of falsehood” (Paul and Matthews, 2016), the use of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Missiroli et al., 2016) than about public diplomacy and international broadcasting.

There is a tendency to apply subjective and selective labelling to the international communication programmes of different countries. As noted in an opinion article appearing in *The Guardian*, “the impression is given is that our governments engage in truthful ‘public relations’, ‘strategic communication’ and ‘public diplomacy’ while the Russians lie through ‘propaganda’”. It is also noted in the same article, these claims and assertions lack sufficient academic support.¹ Together, these forms of information presentation represent examples of the narrative of a return to the Cold War. This has caused an increase in the interest of Russian foreign policy, public diplomacy and notions of soft power.

A specific example of an expression of this increased interest in Russia’s concepts and practice of PD and soft power is in a special issue of the journal *Politics* in late 2015, edited by Michael Barr and Valentina Feklyunina and featuring the theme of *The Soft Power of Hard States*. There a strong link or association being established between Russian foreign policy and the development of soft power strategies in the special issue. Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) argue that Russia does possess elements of soft power, and the attractiveness of its use has been heightened by the poor image of Russia. However, there are a number of apparent problems in terms of the institutional structure for realising soft power, as there is evident stove piping with the duplication of functions and responsibilities. Kiseleva (2015: 325) goes further, stating that the current conflict between Russia and the West “pushes policy makers in Russia to frame Russian soft power in geopolitical terms, as a counterforce to the West and its detrimental soft power, meant to defend Russian national interests”. Thus an influence on Russia’s perception and behaviour is the geopolitical competition with the West.

Another line of academic thought and construction is to lump together ‘like-minded’ international actors, and one of those is seen in increasingly creating a comparison with China. Often there are similar arguments and logic that are found in the examples that are mentioned immediately above. Wilson (2015: 287) argues that:

[b]oth the Kremlin and Beijing consider that the soft power methods of the West present nothing less than an existential threat, and conceive of a soft power policy as the outcome of state initiatives rather than the product of autonomous civil society.

This is in a similar vein to the arguments of Kiseleva (2015), where soft power is seen as a resource of the state to defend itself against the West. This implies the need to engage in an active form of communication with a somewhat modified ‘political technology’ in order to engage in an information war.

The weakness of Russia is its reputation and image, which was raised by Sergunin and Karabeshkin (also see Simons, 2011, 2013). Given the generally less than favourable image of Russia in Western publications, there is a consequent motivation to develop media assets to carry the foreign policy message. Rawnsley (2015) has noted that Russia has set aside significant time and resources in developing its international broadcasting capacity, which is forming an integral part of their PD efforts. These assets are intended to rectify what are deemed as being informational distortions, but increasingly as a means to expose those weak points in the West (in terms of issues and policies). These are attempts to enter into the global conversation and

attempt to influence opinion and perception, which is a competition of credibility among the communicators in a crowded marketplace of ideas.

The PD evolution in the post-Cold War world

PD is a communication-based activity which is widely interpreted and defined by the academic and practitioner communities. One possible definition that captures the essence of it is “referring to the communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives” (Sevin, 2015: 563). PD can therefore be viewed as being an extension to traditional state-to-state diplomacy. British diplomat Tom Fletcher captured the essence of diplomacy. In his words on his Twitter feed he stated that “diplomacy is Darwinian”.² That is, diplomacy is something that is continually evolving in order to adequately meet the challenges of a constantly changing environment, if it is to be successful in meeting policy goals and objectives. There is a dual influence of politics and technology upon how diplomacy is practised. An ever-increasing use of mass media within the framework of PD is being observed:

Mediatization theory raises the stakes of this general approach by arguing that the profound integration of media in to everyday life allows for radical new configurations of practices surrounding the representations of identities and relationships.

(Pamment, 2014: 259)

This form of communication enables a direct form of G2P communication. It opens up possibilities for a direct line of communication with a foreign public, which is interacted with in order to influence and shape their perceptions, opinions and political relationships. Fominykh observes that “in practical terms, both countries are carrying out their ‘soft’ power policy in the form of vast information efforts, including positive interpretation of their foreign policies and, quite recently, wide use of the Internet” (2010: 69). Media channels are a medium of outreach to global publics, and the Internet in particular is able to by-pass the gatekeeping mechanisms that exist in traditional mainstream media.

At a time when government-to-government forms of communication between Western governments and Russia are in a politically dysfunctional state of being, diplomacy conducted through media enables agenda building, socialisation and strategic coordination (Pamment, 2014: 277). This is done through engaging an audience in policy or issue debates. Socialisation occurs with a growing sense of projected familiarity with elements of another culture, identity and way of thinking. The aspect of strategic coordination refers to the information/communication programme being used as a supporting element to the political programme (policy aims and objectives).

The academic community in Russia quickly understood the need to develop their own variant of soft power as a means to counter the US use of it. There was a question of discussing and deriving adequate ways and means of creating and using soft power. One of the means was a wider use of educational and humanitarian cooperation. Dolinsky from *Russkiy Mir* commented that “today, Russian public diplomacy is geared towards tactical tasks; at the present level of conceptualisation of goals and institutional development, it is unable to deal with strategic aims. To succeed, this segment of state policy should be systematised and institutionalised” (Fominykh, 2010: 73–74). One of the significant constraints on Russia PD efforts is the negative image of the country. Different institutions have been created in order to generate a more positive image and reputation of the country internationally. In particular, the use of language and

culture have been used to draw the attention and interest of international publics (Fominykh, 2010: 74). Culture should be part and parcel of any PD effort:

Cultural diplomacy, which has been defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding,” is the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation’s idea of itself is best represented.

(Department of State, 2005: 4)

In spite of there being a superficial lack of readily apparent soft power aspects to Russia, it does exist. Russian classical literature and arts, language and sport, provide some basis that is viewed favourably by some audiences (Simons, 2015b). In addition to the dimension that involves external communication to foreign audiences, culture and identity are key to how a country defines itself, including Russia. The internal communication among citizens of a country requires an effective dialogue in order to capture the essence of a country to which citizens can mostly agree, and this makes the external communication easier owing to an internal agreement and psychological cohesion on national markers of culture and identity. One of the biggest gaps in how soft power is perceived by Joseph Nye, the concept’s founder, and Russia is that the Russian state attempts a top-down approach and not the grassroots and civic society origins found in the United States:

Soft power is always something that society chooses for itself in the knowledge that the choice is voluntary and appealing. Soft power is not built by decree from on high, but takes shape naturally and over a period of many years. In the choice between a point of no return and a turning point in the realisation of potential, the latter looks more constructive and promising.³

The argument is about having a soft power that is perceived as being more genuine and representative of the people of a country, rather than as a ‘contrived’ image representation created by a government and communication specialists. Russia has forgone the integration of ideology into their foreign policy communications and interactions, and instead has adopted an approach based upon the realisation of concrete goals and interests (Ivanov, 2001; Simons, 2014). Interestingly, the Russian military has been working on developing its own soft power concept, which is based in part on the experience and work of the Foreign Ministry as a counter to hybrid warfare threats.⁴ Other scholars have noted the more pragmatic and realistic approach of matching goals with a realistic appraisal of the political situation and environment:

However, since the early 2010s, the course of pragmatic cooperation has demonstrated limitations, as Western nations declined to recognise Russia’s distinct security interests and values . . . Putin’s new vision of Russia as a state-civilisation with distinct interests and values since 2012 sought to compensate for the weaknesses of Medvedev’s cooperative and West-centric approach.

(Tsygankov, 2016: 28)

Thus the political environments domestically and internationally forced a rethink at times as to whether the current strategy of the day is sufficient for the purposes of attaining Russia’s foreign policy objectives. Fominykh recognised by 2010 that “in any rivalry with the United States, the Russian Federation should move towards categories of a higher order – *universal* ideas

and values – and make them attractive to wide foreign audiences” (2010: 74). Russia’s values tend to be somewhat distinct from many other countries. “Russian values and ideas include an authentic concept of spiritual freedom inspired by Eastern Christianity and the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad” (Tsygankov, 2014: 2). Lavrov (2016) also spoke of Russia’s unique set of values and the long historical antagonism to defend its borders from different foreign invaders, which echoes the views expressed by Tsygankov. In its current form, Russian PD situates Russia as being in opposition to US global hegemony and the associated policies, such as regime change (MID, 2013; Simons, 2014, 2015a). Andrei Manoilo, a geopolitical expert in Russia, believes that the US has been somewhat unsuccessful in adapting and countering Russian foreign policy owing to its asymmetry:

Yes, the Americans are still expecting symmetric responses from us, expecting that we respond to a strike with a strike. You know, we are very lucky to have Sergey Lavrov as foreign minister. He is a Gorchakov-style diplomat and leader of the department of foreign policy in Russia. Lavrov participates actively in making foreign-policy decisions in Russia.⁵

Here Manoilo alludes to the success of Russian foreign policy in terms of effective leadership and strategies. Namely, this is the coincidence of a very effective leader of foreign policy, together with a viable strategy during a difficult period. It also points to an attempt to establish and play the rules of their own ‘game’ rather than to follow reactively the US lead.

Organisationally speaking, there has been a shake-up of public diplomacy organisational structures and also touching operational aspects. In addition to the formal state-based instruments of diplomacy and PD, the Russian Foreign Ministry maintains and cultivates relations with NGOs, where these organisations interact on various international topics. This also functions at the formal level. On 7 May 2012, President Putin signed into law *On Measures to Implement the Foreign Policy Course of the Russian Federation*,⁶ which specifically mentions a role for civil society (including NGOs) in the foreign policy process. In 2012 some 250 events within the framework of Foreign Ministry and NGO interaction were held. Relations with the Public Chamber are developing, and *Rossotrudnichestvo*⁷ maintains relations with some 150 NGOs. There are currently some 5,000 officially registered NGOs involved in foreign policy, of which 859 possess an international status.⁸ These serve as a means for helping to develop and influence the information environment.

Two such NGOs were founded by the President of Russia. On 2 February 2010, President Medvedev signed decrees that established the *Alexander Gorchakov Fund to Support Public Diplomacy* (<http://gorchakovfund.ru/>) and the *Russian International Affairs Council* (<http://russiancouncil.ru/en/>). Both organisations are located within the structure of the Foreign Ministry, and the Russian International Affairs Council is also associated with the Ministry of Education. The funding for these organisations comes from the state budget.⁹ The President of the Russian International Affairs Council, Igor Ivanov, noted that with regard to the active participation of society and public organisations in international affairs “Russia is seriously lagging behind other countries and, consequently, it is at a disadvantage in the formation of public opinion abroad”.¹⁰ In 2013 there was a major revamping of Russia’s international media by presidential decree, which had significant effects upon RT, Voice of Russia and RIA Novosti. A new institution was created, Russia Today, with Dmitry Kiselyov as its head (known for his conservative and anti-Western views).¹¹ The effect and likely intention was to bring in a much more consistent and uniform message and narrative across state-controlled media outlets engaged in PD.

The very latest iteration of Russian Foreign Policy Concepts (MID, 2016), progresses from where MID 2013 left off. Instead of speaking about the necessity to challenge the dangerous excesses of US foreign policy, it speaks of fundamental changes occurring in the international system. This is namely the relative decline of Western dominance and the emergence of a multipolar international system. There is the stressed need for Russia to protect her interests and objectives in this environment, but also to cooperate with other actors within mutual interests and goals.

The return of multi-polarity in the global system of public diplomacy and foreign affairs

From the perspective of political marketing, an election can be characterised as a competitive form of political communication that creates a sense of conflict and competition between competing political images, reputations and brands. As the opposing sides lobby their offerings and cause, the outcome is decided by whose communications resonate the most with the target audience (Newman, 1999). This particular political conflict/competition is played out in the public information space via various channels of media carrying political communication in a global geopolitical context. One of the current threats facing Russia, according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, is “a distorted view of the international situation and Russia’s international standing” (2016: 1). This competition and conflict is readily observable in the public information space, where different outlets and channels of communication play out this ‘election’ of credibility and popularity.

This final point of observation and commentary speaks of other possible reasons for an increasing level of soft power potential. Fyodor Lukyanov, chief editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, stated:

[c]ulture is, of course, always important and Russia has a powerful cultural arsenal . . . But when it comes to short-term changes, the comparison of this year to last, the position in the ranking is not determined by eternal values but by specific political actions.¹²

Therefore, a country’s hard arsenal can be an asset if used appropriately at the right moment in time. Some surveys have produced unexpected results too, such as a YouGov poll on the world’s top 20 most admired men. Vladimir Putin came in at number six on the global list, a higher ranking than both the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis.¹³ In spite of receiving an overwhelmingly negative coverage in mainstream Western media, Putin is still an attractive political figure for different political publics, those who see him as representing a challenge to global US hegemony and others that see him as being an upholder of traditional values (Simons, 2015c). This means that the issue of politics and even the use of hard power can play a positive role in Russia’s soft power potential if events, issues and reputations are managed more deliberately and effectively.

In a 2016 global soft power survey, Russia ranked 27th out of the 30 top countries (McClory, 2016: 37). Russia was a new entry in this rating system in 2016, in spite of a negative image projected through mainstream Western politics and mass media. One of the suppositions for this ranking was based upon the vast cultural soft power that is possessed by Russia. The news of this ranking sparked an immediate debate. One argument was that the element of Russian (the other elements being government and engagement) culture is proving decisive. “Soft power use[s] attraction and persuasion to change minds and influence behaviour. Its sources include culture,

political values and positive global engagement”. McCloy noted that one of the constraints on Russia’s performance is negative reporting and news about the country.¹⁴ Others evaluated the outcome of the top 30 ranking as being helped through the use and development of international broadcasting media, and a large number of foreign university students (some 185,000 of them in 2014–15). A binary vision of global popularity was also offered. “In the diplomatic sphere, Russia’s recent success in Syria is part of particular note in a world dominated by an ideology of American exceptionalism, which regards Russian foreign policy as audacious and unacceptable”.¹⁵ It is important to note that foreign policy does not exist in a bubble beyond the borders of the country concerned.

Russian foreign policy is not something that remains disconnected from Russia’s domestic policy; ideally there should be some form of connection between the public and the country’s foreign policy. In the context of the current period of competition and conflict with the West, Russia’s foreign policy shapes the self-perception of not only the political elites, but also of ordinary Russians. By reasserting its position in international affairs, there has been an increased sense of patriotism that has grown through the perception that Russia is gaining her ‘rightful’ place and respect in the world.¹⁶ Russia’s relations with the West are determined by the sum effect of the sides’ attitudes and interactions. “Russia cooperates with the Western nations when its fundamental values and interests are not challenged. When they are challenged, Russia tends to turn to nationalist and assertive foreign policy, especially if it possesses sufficient power capabilities” (Tsygankov, 2014: 2). This assertion is especially evident in the West’s and Russia’s interactions and rhetoric concerning Ukraine and Syria. In line with this, the United States and Russia seemingly form each other’s Other, and the rising and waning fortunes of the other exert some sort of flow on effect.

In the global debate about the relationship between the West and Islam, the United States faces many negative challenges and perceptions, such as the Abu Ghraib scandal, US policies on the Israeli–Palestinian issues and the Iraq War in 2003. All of these have come together to damage US credibility and its power to persuade. They see their political salvation in “cultural diplomacy . . . [as] a means by which we may engage and influence that debate” (Department of State, 2005: 3). Russia can learn lessons from this approach too, especially given its image and reputation that is projected by the West. A similar diplomatic and reputational challenge is faced. A relative weakness of one actor may be exploited by an opponent as their strength. As in an election outcome, the contest is not always about the best possible candidate, but also potentially in some situations, the least worst.

Russia has positioned itself, within the contextual alignment of its foreign policy, as a challenger to the US-led global hegemony. One of the challenges that is faced by Russia in this sphere is how to approach the perceived threat of regime change that emerges via branded revolutions and ‘democracy promotion’. These events are staged within the informational space that potentially affects the perception and behaviour of the targeted audiences (Sussman, 2010), which is seen as a risk and a threat to Russian state security. In order to meet this challenge, Russia needs to be able to negate the effects of its rivals and to ‘sell’ their own story to a sceptical global public. Communicating messages through mass media forms a critical element of the foreign policy goals. Frames are created in order to identify a problem and subsequently to offer a possible solution. When covering political events, issues and actors, a systematic approach is taken: (1) to define effects or conditions as being problematic; (2) identifying causes; (3) then to convey moral judgement; and finally, (4) to endorse certain remedies or improvements (Entman, 2004: 5). This conflict is seen clearly being played out in the public information sphere through media coverage of key events and processes.

Russian international broadcasting efforts have drawn a lot of attention and some revealing analysis. The annual budget of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is US\$730 million

per annum; currently RT's is US\$307 million. Jeff Shell the chairman of BBG noted in a recent media interview that "there's no question we're badly underfunded and don't have enough money to compete with our adversaries". In spite of RT's budget being lower, the article noted "the Russian operation is more focussed and efficient". The article elaborated further, "the network also appears to be dominating in the 'new media' sphere . . . RT has emerged as the world's top TV news network on You Tube, having garnered more than 3 billion views across its channels on the site".¹⁷ The United States also characterises the current global situation as a geopolitical conflict. A significant point from this article is that international broadcasting efforts within PD need to be focused and efficient and not just on a bigger scale. Otherwise the message becomes lost in an overcrowded market place of communicated ideas.

The presence of RT in the international broadcasting scene has caused a lot of interest and speculation as to its supposed levels of success and its abilities to influence audiences. A difference of opinion exists, which can be seen in the literature. One line of thought characterises RT as "competing aggressively" with the United States for global hearts and minds (Seib, 2010; Dale et al., 2012). Given the increasing competition for attention and influence in international affairs, RT does fulfil a function of getting the national narrative into the international arena in order to create a sense of familiarity with Russia and its policies. This creates the interpretation by some observers as creating a fine line between propaganda and public diplomacy (Rawnsley, 2015). There are those that see and project RT as being a threat by undermining the global information space with 'unreliable' information. RT's format, style and content have been dismissed, in some instances, as consisting of the use of 'conspiracy theories' (Yablokov, 2015). Sometimes different realities simply do not add up, causing some kind of dissonance. "US security services have fingered the channel as a key player in the Kremlin's efforts to sway Western politics. But inside its offices, RT seems a far cry from what the US says it is – and what it aspires to be".¹⁸ For all of the opinions expressed, it is easy to understand the Measure of Activity of RT, but much more difficult to gauge with any precision the Measure of Effect.

At times, Western analysis of Russian foreign policy is tinged with assumptions and projections that are simply not there. As these assertions appear, there can be little of substance to support these claims, other than the fact that the claim has been made. An article by Natalie Nougayrède that appeared in *The Guardian* falls into this category. "The president (Putin) has never forgotten the Afghan debacle of the 1980s and demands redemption in Syria"¹⁹ Putin is not a solitary actor in all of Russia's domestic and foreign affairs; the high level of personalisation is not credible. The connection to the reality of the Russian engagement in Syria is at best tenuous. These factors include supporting a long-term Soviet and now Russian ally to counter the threat of the latest evolution of 'Colour Revolutions', and the geopolitical context that demands Russia support this ally (unlike permitting the regime change that took place in Libya) in order to retain any possibility of influence and credibility in the region as a serious actor. Others tend to conflate propaganda and public diplomacy, seeking to undermine any possible legitimacy in Russian policy or interests through a series of carefully selected rhetorical labels:

To the extent Russia's propaganda effort is effective, it poses challenges to key foreign policy goals of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. These foreign policy goals are to deter further aggression (either military or ideological) by Russia in former Soviet territories and elsewhere, encourage the growth of strong civil societies and democratic political institutions in the region, and improve the image of the United States and its European allies as potential economic and political partners.

(Gerber and Zavisca, 2016: 79)

The above demonstrates the use of creating information on a certain subject or object; if that information becomes sticky it is transformed into knowledge. In this regard, knowledge serves as a form of conventional ‘wisdom’. In this case, the narrative of this information is that Russia is to be contained (military and ideologically) and the United States is likely to be the benefactor of any changes in zones of influence. This is in keeping with Tsygankov’s (2016) contention of an era of competition between Russia and the West, but also demonstrates that this is a far from one-way process. The idea of an information war existing within the context of a New Cold War does exist in both Russia and the West, where media is at the forefront. Scores are kept by some analysts and commentators, such as Russia’s apparent victory in the media narrative on Ukraine among former Soviet Republics.²⁰ Ivan Timofeev notes “each party insists that it is on the defensive in terms of information policy, seeking merely to counter hostile information distribution. All sides tend to significantly overstate the possibilities of their neighbours in terms of information war and its outcome”.²¹ Other attempts include trying to shut down the permissible discourse (enforcing a spiral of silence) and open empathy with the Russian position:

Russia’s European “understanders” legitimise Moscow’s Eurasian ambitions and the right to defend its interests and those of its “compatriots” by force and annexation. Some commentators predict that a “Fifth International, a loose collection of anti-status quo forces is emerging out of the chaos of the Ukraine conflict”.

(Makarychev and Braghiroli, 2016: 6)

This is a means to undermine the credibility of an actor, and does not take into account the level of validity of what is communicated. At times, an opponent may have valid points, which is difficult to accept within the context of a geopolitical information war that is based upon perception and credibility. An article concerning the views of Stephen Cohen reinforces this point; as controversial as he may be, he does make some valid points.²² An attempt is made by the sides to create a binary reality of right and wrong, truth and lies, information and propaganda. It not only concerns getting one’s own message across, but attempting to cripple the opponent’s communication credibility. The creation of East Stratcom can be seen as an institution created with this specific purpose in mind. The EU announced “an attempt to start trying to win hearts and minds in eastern partnership countries” through “launching a rapid-response team to counter what it considers biased Russian media reports”.²³ NATO has been taking a similar approach, making use of such slogans as the Kremlin’s “weaponisation of information”. In 2016 NATO produced a 23-page document to analyse the issue.²⁴ Within this information war, mockumentaries have made an appearance. One of these was aired on BBC2 in early 2016. *World War Three: Inside the War Room* portrayed the scene of hybrid war in the Latgale province in Latvia becoming a nuclear war. The airing of this drew harsh critique, including from the Latvian Foreign Minister who denounced the film as “rubbish”.²⁵ These are all part of an attempt to follow the path noted earlier from Entman (2004): (1) define effects or conditions as problematic; (2) identify causes; (3) convey moral judgement; and (4) endorse certain remedies or improvements.

In spite of the information war and the dominant narrative of the Russian threat and Russian aggression, the results do not equate to an effort to make those labels sticky. This is often the result of a contextual perception of realities. “Most Europeans see Russia as a ‘minor’ threat compared to Islamic State, the refugee crisis or other issues”. The Pew study found a great deal of dramatic differences between the opinions and perceptions of the different European countries surveyed.²⁶ Other surprising results have been witnessed in the Ukraine issue, which has been considered a PD disaster for Russia. In 2016 the Razumkov Centre ran a survey on who

was responsible for the war in Ukraine. Of respondents, 9 per cent blamed only Kyiv, 33 per cent blamed both Moscow and Kyiv, and 48 per cent blamed only Moscow.²⁷ One situation does not necessarily dictate a permanent future path in foreign policy.

Unlike events in Ukraine, Russia's military engagement in Syria was perceived in a more positive light. This was in spite of the negative coverage in many mainstream Western media outlets that used similar narratives to those associated with events in Ukraine. Western leaders and media made many dire predictions and were proven wrong by a quick political decision and decisive military action. This forced the United States into having to acknowledge Russian interests and objectives in the country.²⁸ One article marked this as a significant turning point in global politics as an emerging multipolar world order.²⁹ Perhaps even more importantly, it signalled that the global narrative on Syria had been lost by the United States and was gained by Russia,³⁰ which in practical terms meant that the United States was forced to respond to a now more Russian-led narrative on the Syrian conflict. Some 71 per cent of respondents in a poll (27,000 respondents) in the UK supported the Russian military intervention in Syria, in spite of overwhelmingly critical media coverage.³¹ A YouGov poll conducted in the United Kingdom in 2015 saw 59 per cent of respondents supportive of the UK and the United States cooperating with Russia in Syria to fight ISIS,³² and this is running contrary to the message coming from mainstream Western politicians that stated categorically that they would not cooperate. In this regard, media coverage of Russia's military intervention in Syria has acted according to Pamment's (2014) account of mediatisation of PD: (1) engaged in agenda building; (2) brought about a level of socialisation of the international public; and (3) performed the role of strategic coordination.

Russia maintains that it is fighting a defensive informational war in its foreign policy, which contradicts the mainstream Western political narrative that it is fighting an offensive war. This contest has been clearly seen in the competing narratives of competing public diplomacy messages of these actors. One political analyst, Dmitry Abzalov, has characterised a transformation of Russia's diplomatic relations: "Unlike previous years, when Moscow was in a defensive pattern of diplomatic relations, now it plays a more active role in the world".³³ But the results can be described as being somewhat 'mixed'. A recent Pew Research poll has found that 90 per cent of Americans view Russia's power and influence as a threat, and that 72 per cent polled believe that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign. However, this has not translated into an angry response toward Russia and Putin. Instead, Putin's favourability has increased slightly in comparison with two years ago. This is found in terms of an expressed grudging respect being shown.³⁴ Therefore, even though audiences in the United States were not necessarily consuming information from Russian PD sources, and did tend to believe the projected threats, they did not feel threatened, especially among Republican and conservative voting segments (thus tending to support the observations in Simons, 2015c; see also Laruelle, 2015).

At the same time that Russia seeks to look for an identity for its foreign policy, there are changes in identity that are occurring in the wider world, which may actually assist Russian foreign policy goals and objectives without being an official part of it. Ivan Timofeev notes the massive changes in identity and culture that are taking place in the world, especially after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. The United States' very identity and shared cultural or political foundations are being shaken by what he terms "pragmatic nationalism".³⁵ In spite of public attempts by his opponents to portray Trump as being a puppet of Putin via mass media and social media, US cultural conservatives tend to be much more sympathetic to Russia and its leader as geopolitical concerns are not top of their agenda – social issues are their greatest concern. A Gallup poll from February 2017 revealed that support among US Republicans for

Vladimir Putin has increased from 12 per cent in 2015 to 32 per cent now.³⁶ This should not necessarily be seen as a success of Russian public diplomacy, but rather a failure of social politics in the West that has assisted Russia's image and reputation through people to people interaction.

Constraints on Russian PD

The author approached two people working within Russian PD, Dr Ivan Timofeev³⁷ the Director of programmes at the Russian International Affairs Council, and Dr Anna Velikaya³⁸ a PD expert with the Alexander Gorchakov Foundation. Both Timofeev and Velikaya were asked the same question: what are the main constraints on Russian PD? There was some agreement and divergence evident in the answers given.

According to Dr Timofeev, he saw three primary constraints faced by Russian PD. These were financial in nature, a lack of professional workers, and the third point was a heavy dependence on state institutions. Therefore, the focus is on the internal components that are necessary for the creation and implementation of PD programmes – finance, personnel and organisational structures.

A broader range of issues was identified by Dr Velikaya. She named one of the constraints as being the manner in which Russia approached their target audiences. “Till recently Russian PD initiatives were focused on inter-governmental relations or projects with cultural intelligentsia while neglecting the work with civil society and the expert community: NGOs, policy and decision makers, International Relations scholars”. This observation echoes the criticism of Timofeev's third point. Both of these criticisms are in line with Nye's understanding and vision of the active participation and involvement of grass roots society in helping to realise soft power potential. To back this critique, she noted that Russia had backed the Ukrainian elite and had invested some US\$200 billion in their economy, whereas the US invested US\$5 billion in civil society. The results of Euromaidan have proved the Russian strategy to be ineffective in the strategy employed by their geopolitical rival. The knock-on effects of the events in Ukraine have had a negative knock-on effect on Russian PD efforts in the wider region.

Another weakness identified was a lack in the “prioritisation of the target audience”. This means a more deliberate and effective approach to identifying key public segments. Further, “the weak point of Russian PD is the focus on civil, people to people and cultural diplomacy, while the[re is a] lack of track II diplomacy initiatives”. Velikaya also noted that the approach to PD is often taken from the perspective of the assumption of how a particular audience views Russia and not the way that they really perceive the country and people.

A number of potential approaches were given in order to address those current weaknesses in Russian PD. These include:

[t]he work with compatriots could be shifted towards work with scholars, journalists and decision-makers who can become bridges between their home country and the society that they are successfully integrated in, or government scholarships for the international students could cover not only the university tuition fee, but also living expenses.

Velikaya's focus differed from Timofeev as she placed much more emphasis on the nature and quality of the communication and subsequent relationships that are formed with foreign publics.

These reflections by Timofeev and Velikaya seem to not point to a New Cold War or a symmetrical confrontation of values, but rather it involves political rivalry that occurs within the realm of information and perception. In order to compete successfully in such an environment,

Russia needs to get its message directly to global publics in an unfiltered form. This not only involves impersonal communication via mass media, but also more personal P2P-based diplomacy. The constraints and obstacles outlined by Timofeev and Velikaya make this task ever more problematic.

Possible future trends and prospects

“The dominance of hierarchical, state-to-state classical diplomacy is fading away as networks increasingly determine the direction of global events” (McClory, 2016: 21). The easiest and most expedient way to reach and influence those global networks is through expanding one’s digital diplomacy footprint. The trend being indicated in research (Simons, 2015a), with state-state level diplomacy in disarray between Russia and the West, is that the logical step is to communicate with foreign publics, especially via social media, which would facilitate not only dialogic communication but also relationship building.

Drs Timofeev and Velikaya were both asked a second question, which concerned their personal predictions of possible future trends and tendencies in Russian PD. Timofeev gave three predictions – that it “will be affected negatively by political conjuncture”; second that “it may be marginalised by information warfare”; and third, “it will be increasingly concentrated in state institutions”. Velikaya, on the other hand, predicted a more legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems by Russian PD. “Russia insists that coercive democratisation can bring nothing but harm to the states with their specific way of development, the nation state is the only reliable guarantor of the world order”. She pointed out that Russia has reaped some gains from conducting a foreign policy line from the 2013 foreign policy doctrine that situated Russia as a counter to the US policy of regime change. But she feels there is room for improvement including tapping further potential. “The Russian position on Syria, Iraq and Libya was warmly welcomed by millions of people all over the world, but Russia has much untapped potential in offering its own framework of international engagement through public diplomacy methods”. Thus it is not only about standing in opposition to something, but being able to offer an attractive alternative. Velikaya also foresaw the big countries of the Eurasian partnership becoming a key region of focus for Russian PD efforts.

Conclusion

The current state of international relations has not yet seen a return to a New Cold War, in spite of some stating this to be the new ‘old’ reality. What is evident is an information war through diplomatic and mass media channels that involves lobbying and influencing international audiences with clashing and competing sets of norms and values. Russia projects itself as fighting a defensive information war against the US-led West, and positions itself in the ‘market’ of international actor positions as being a benevolent force and a challenger niche to some aspects of US foreign policy. This defensive challenger positioning does have some advantages over the incumbent United States – there is a growing discontent across the left and right of the political spectrum (Simons, 2015c) of the effects of foreign and domestic policy in the West, including regime change/foreign military interventions, immigration and value systems. By positioning itself as a ‘defensive’ actor, the implication is that it is reacting to an injustice that has been imposed by an ‘offensive’ actor. An emerging problem is the increasingly politicised and hyperbolic nature of the media and information space, for example seen in the accusations concerning Russia’s alleged hacking of the DNC and power grid with little credible evidence to hand.³⁹ This has had the effect of creating a very problematic and toxic information environment.

A lot of the processes and events that have been detailed in this chapter are hedged within a framework and context of geopolitics. Russia's foreign policy is seemingly intrinsically linked to domestic policy. It has contextualised its foreign policy position as being in opposition to the excesses and instability caused by US policy, especially in reference to the role played by regime change and hybrid warfare. The link between foreign and domestic policy appears to be the desire to avert the use of regime change or hybrid war (such as the Colour Revolutions and Arab Spring) being possibly used against the government of the Russian Federation. Thus in some regards, the current foreign policy direction can be seen as a preventative strategy.

Russia projects itself as a unique civilisational force, created under specific historical circumstances. This seems to be a means to legitimise and justify its adherence to a special developmental and civilisational path (in likeness to the US 'exceptionalism' narrative). A question to ask could be: does this help or hinder an international public from empathising with the Russian perspective and policy agenda? Empathy is based on a sense of familiarity, but some of what Russia conveys to the outside world is the sense of the Russian enigma. The 2013 Russian foreign policy doctrine and some media communications do emphasise Russia's geopolitical position as being in opposition to the United States. However, it remains to be seen whether Russia will retain this oppositional stance or go further and adopt the position of Fominykh (2010) and create a universal set of ideas and values that compete with their geopolitical rivals.

Even though culture and other 'soft' aspects have been traditionally associated as core to any country's soft power potential, other aspects that have been considered 'hard', such as the decisive use of politics and military force, can also have an impact on a country's perceived attractiveness in the short term. In answer to how are foreign policy, communication means and event/issue opportunity coinciding in global events, Russia has a number of problems, not least of which is its brand and reputation which place constraints upon its operational choices. However, the use of new media has meant that the playing field has been slightly levelled as it enables a clear and dialogic channel of communication directly with international publics. It gives the ability to define certain conditions and effects as problematic (such as Syria), it identifies the causes (US foreign policy for example), conveys moral judgement (it is not ethical to use force to impose 'democracy' upon another state), and endorses certain remedies or improvements (opposing US global hegemony and military intervention in Syria).

Any strengths that Russian PD messaging has are due to weaknesses in US messaging. This is owing to how publics perceive and interpret events. For example, the United States framed the Syrian conflict within the Arab Spring and a battle between democracy and dictatorship, freedom and oppression, in order to justify regime change (Simons, 2016). However, Russian intervention was possible due to public perception not of human values, but security concerns (rising levels of terrorism and the refugee crisis).

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